BILLY SHEEHAN

By Andy Aledort

Way, way back in the annals of rock 'n' roll history, the bass (upright and electric) was considered exclusively a *supportive* instrument, instrinsic to the rhythm section, and was rarely given solo space. When a bassist did solo, he/she would usually stick to the walking patterns that were generally used within the song. Jazz bassists, however, were given solo space, as were bluegrass bassists (the real originators of "slap" bass), and with the advent of better instruments and louder amps, rock bassists began to tear it up. My first bass hero, and one of the first guys to "flash out" on bass, was the inimitable John Entwistle, whose two-bar breaks on the Who's "My Generation" were full of feeling, technique and *sound.* His bass sounded loud, distorted and powerful, and his playing overall reflected an attitude of aggressive freedom and spontaneity. A little later on, a Welshman by the name of Jack Bruce pushed rock bass to new limits, as the focus of his band, Cream, was group improvisation of the highest order. Jack's sense of rhythmic freedom, combined with his original sound and great technique, has made him probably the most influential rock bassist of all time. Let's not forget Paul McCartney, too, and if you have any doubts, check out "Taxman" and "I Want You (She's So heavy)." Coming out of the 60s, there was a flood of great bassists in all forms of popular music, most notably Chris Squire in Yes and Larry Graham with Sly and the Family Stone, Stanley Clarke with Return to Forever and Jaco Pastorius, with and without Weather Report, leading up to today's top innovators, Geddy Lee of Rush, Steve Harris of Iron Maiden and the *King* of rock bass, Billy Sheehan, who, as winner of the Readers Choice Award in the Bass Power category, is the focus of this month's column.

What you see before you is the transcription to Billy's solo piece, "NV43345," from his days with the group Talas, found on the album *Sink Your Teeth Into That.* This piece could be considered the bass equivalent of Eddie Van Halen's "Eruption," as Billy, like Eddie, pulls out all the stops and showcases some startling techniques of his own.

The tune begins with ascending diads played against root notes which ring into each diad, followed by nice chord work, utilizing Fsus2, Dm/F (or F6) and Cm/Eb (or Eb6). Arpeggios follow which are picked with a rolling motion using the thumb, index, middle and ring fingers, with the middle-finger pick muted by the ring finger. Billy follows with tapped arpeggios which speed up and slow down intentionally, a technique he uses throughout the piece. The entire piece is very free harmonically, too, with far too many subtle key changes and chordal allusions to list all of them here. I suggest that you spend time with each phrase and try to analyze how it works into itself and how it relates to the surrounding phrases.

Because this piece is in free time (without any imposed strict rhythm), the time signatures represented are based on each particular phrase, so you'll notice that almost every bar has a new signature. Remember, the piece is played very freely and the time signatures shown are just for reference; listen to the recording to see how Billy approaches each phrase, and then decide how much freedom you want to give yourself when recreating this piece.

The highlights: The tapped patterns that start at 0:15 (minisec) and continue till 0:40 are articulated beautifully; it's difficult to play these figures so cleverly without unwanted fret and string noise. The following harmonic row is created primarily by hammering on and off the G string at the second fret while sliding the side of the picking hand up and down the string between the 17th fret and the bridge. At about 0:47, Billy holds the chord down and creates "tapped harmonies" by hitting the strings lightly above certain frets. The bass tone must be very midrangy and punchy to recreate harmonies the way Billy does. Billy creates a sustained fuque-like pattern utilizing the technique initiated at the beginning of the tune. Analyze the chord movement; it combines classical voice-leading techniques with basic rock chord movement.

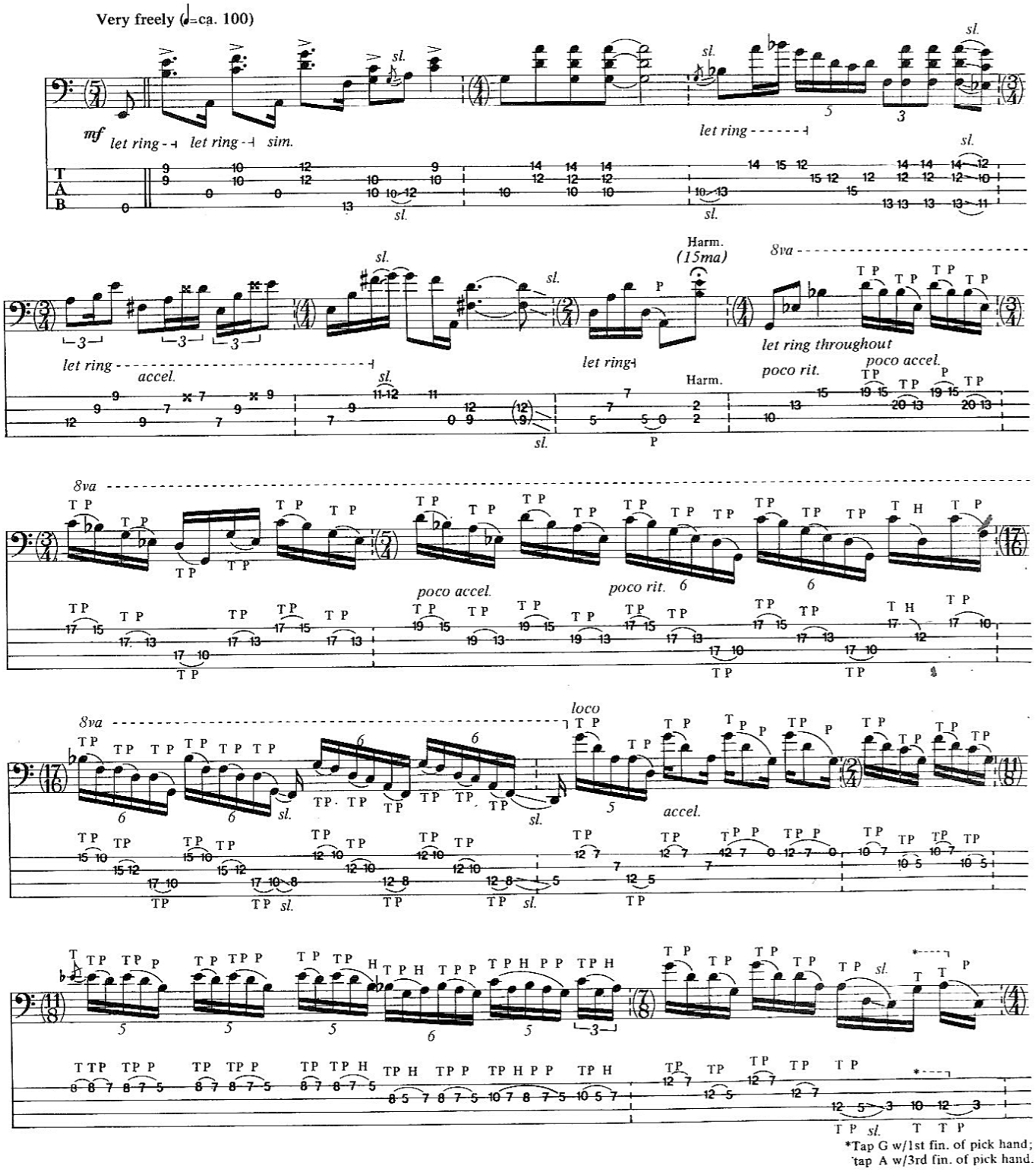
Billy does a little neck bending here and there when sustaining harmonies (tremolo bars for bass probably weren't readily available at the time) and ends the tune by slowly detuning the E string (sounds like there's a little guffaw at the very end). This is a fun piece to play and is, for the most part, not as difficult as it seems.

P.S.: NV43345 is Sheehan upside-down and backwards (sort of). See ya next month.

NV43345

As Recorded by Talas

(From the album SINK YOUR TEETH INTO THAT/Relativity Records)

Music by William Sheehan

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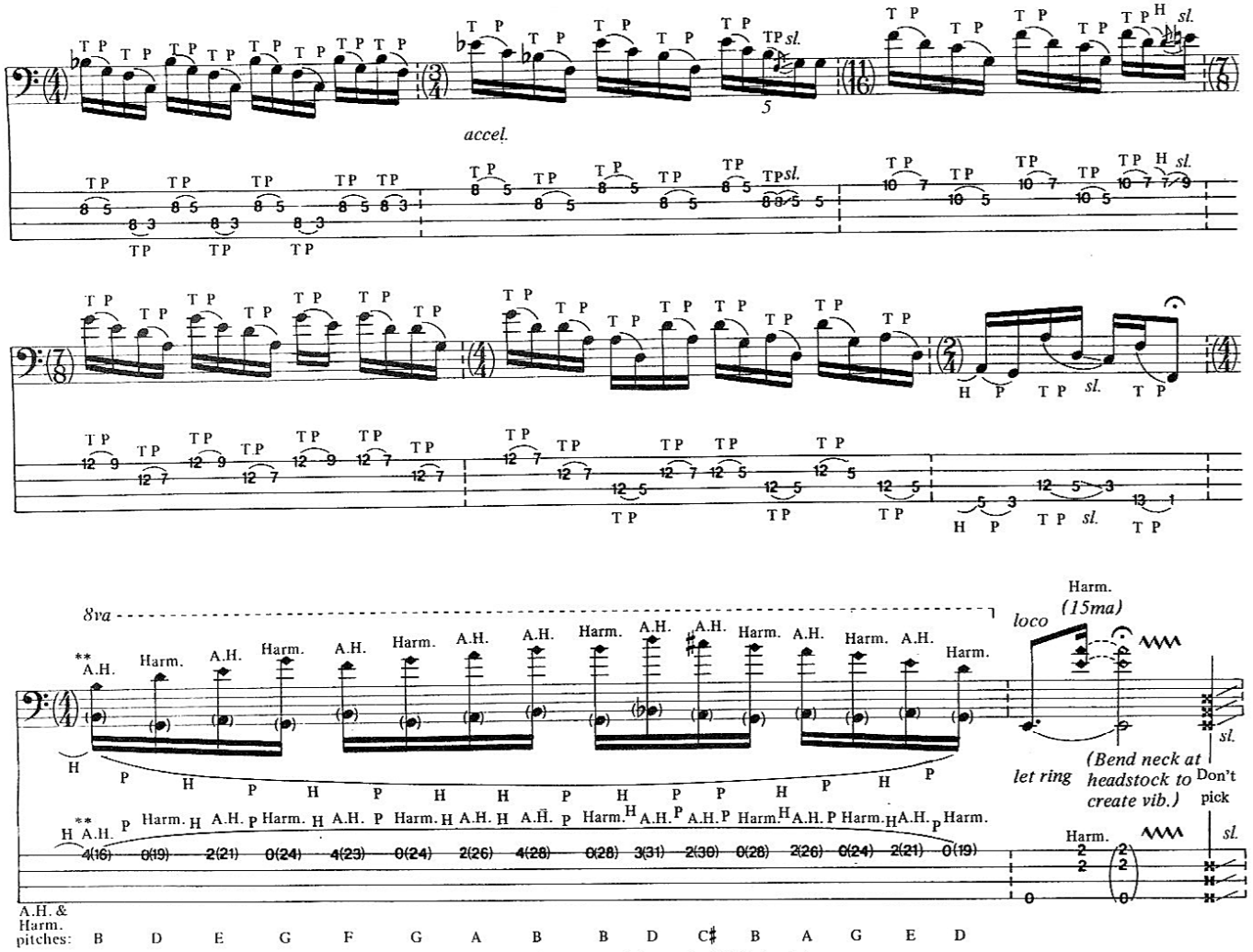
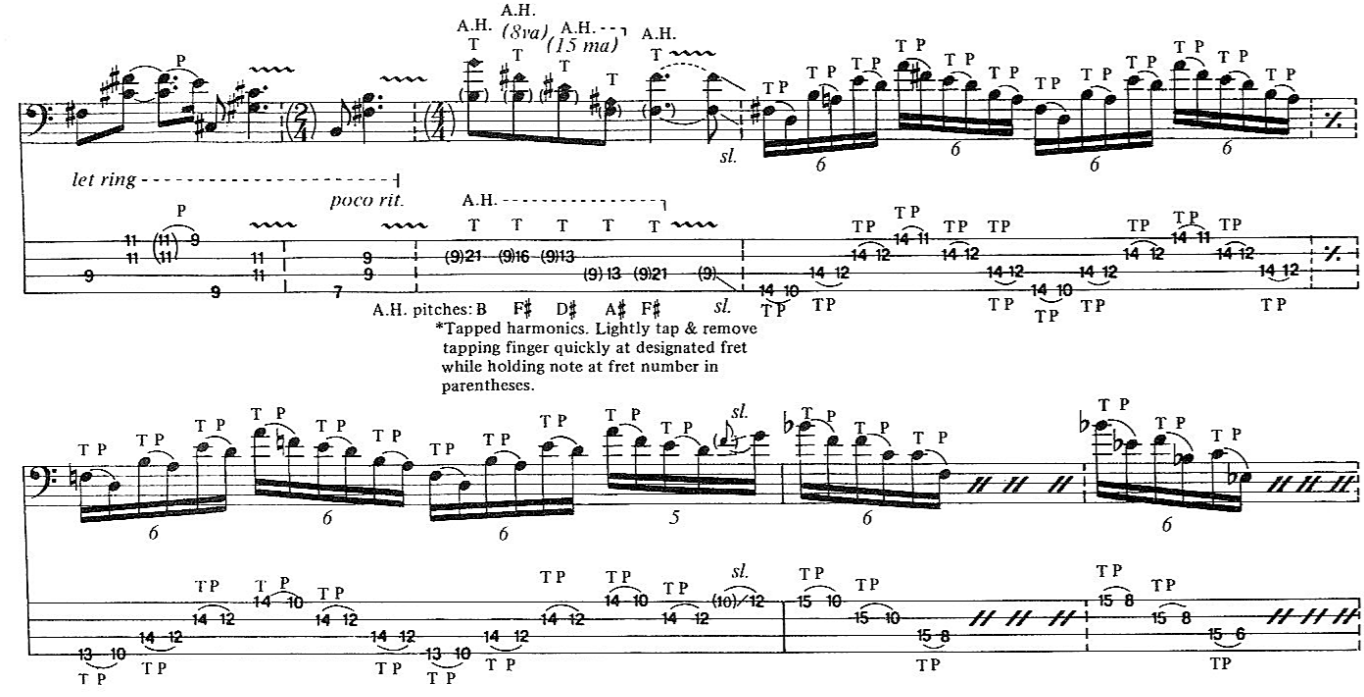
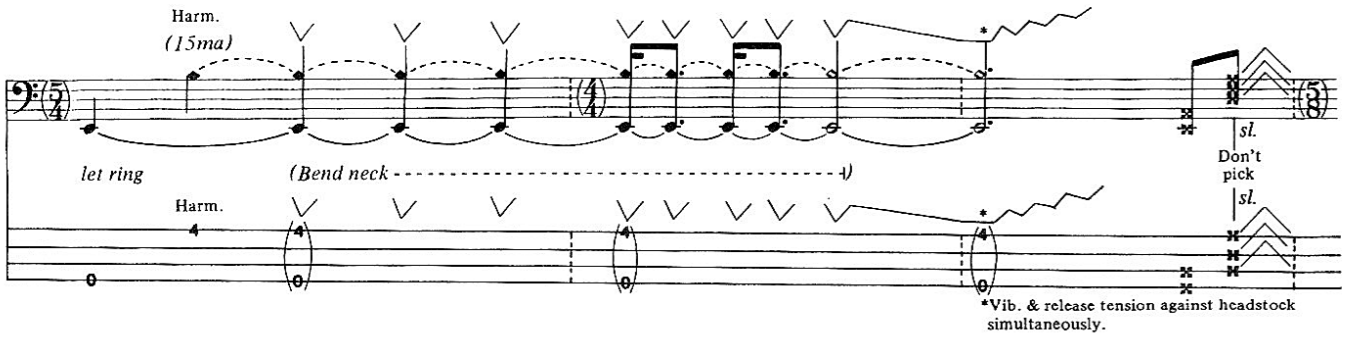


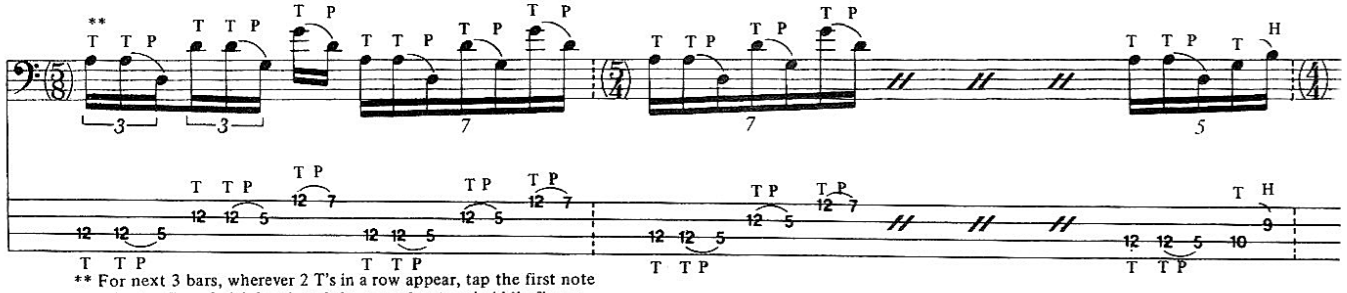
**Fret number in parentheses represents position of pick hand as it moves up & down stg., lightly touching it to produce harmonics. All attacks are created by fret hand, hammering-on & pulling-off.



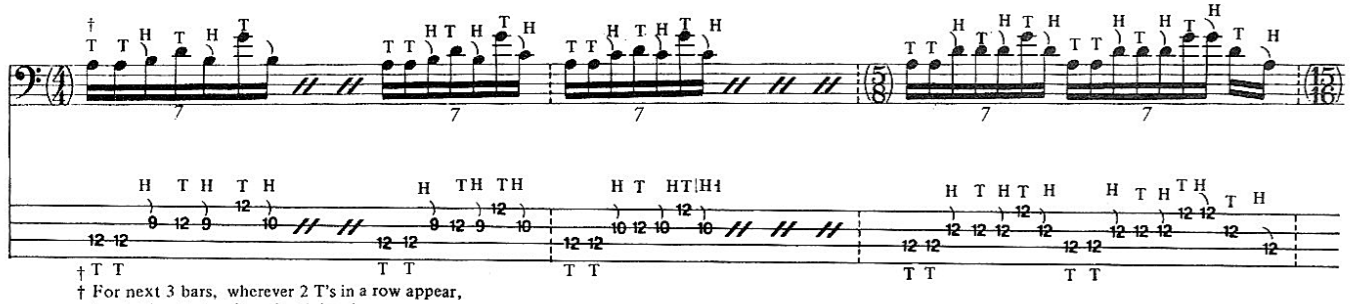
*Tapped harmonics. Lightly tap & remove tapping finger quickly at designated fret while holding note at fret number in parentheses.



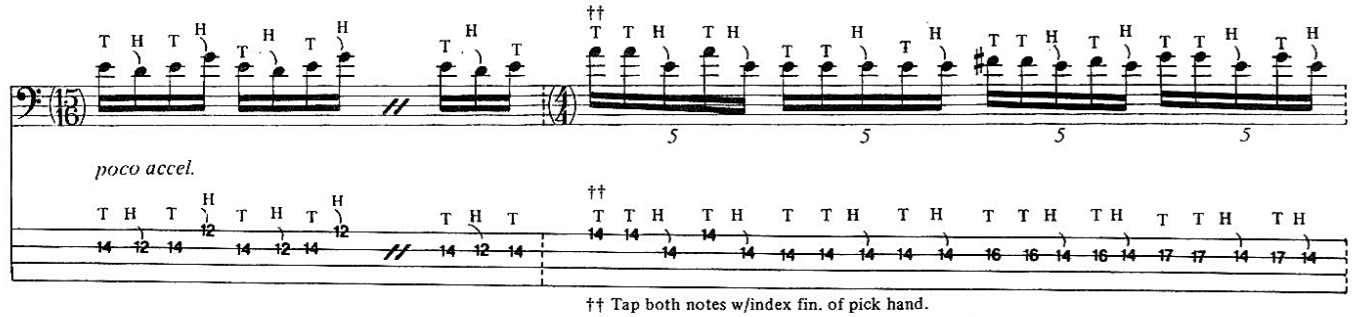
*Vib. & release tension against headstock simultaneously.



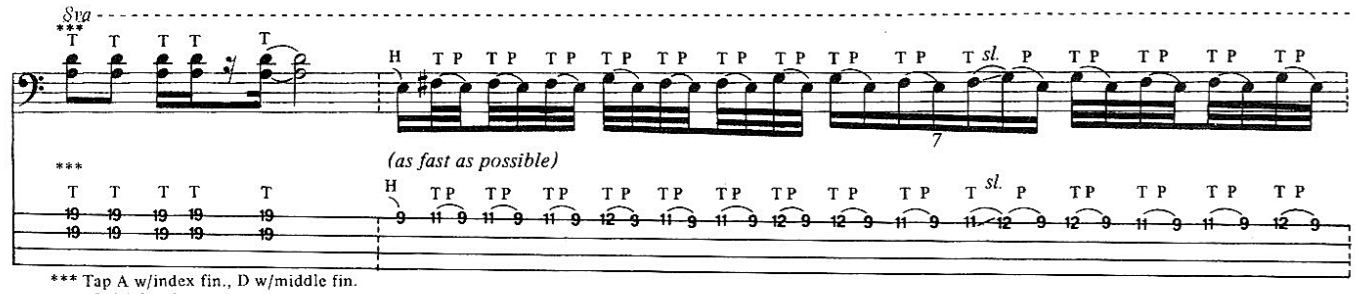
** For next 3 bars, wherever 2 T's in a row appear, tap the first note w/index fin. of pick hand, and the second note w/middle finger of pick hand.

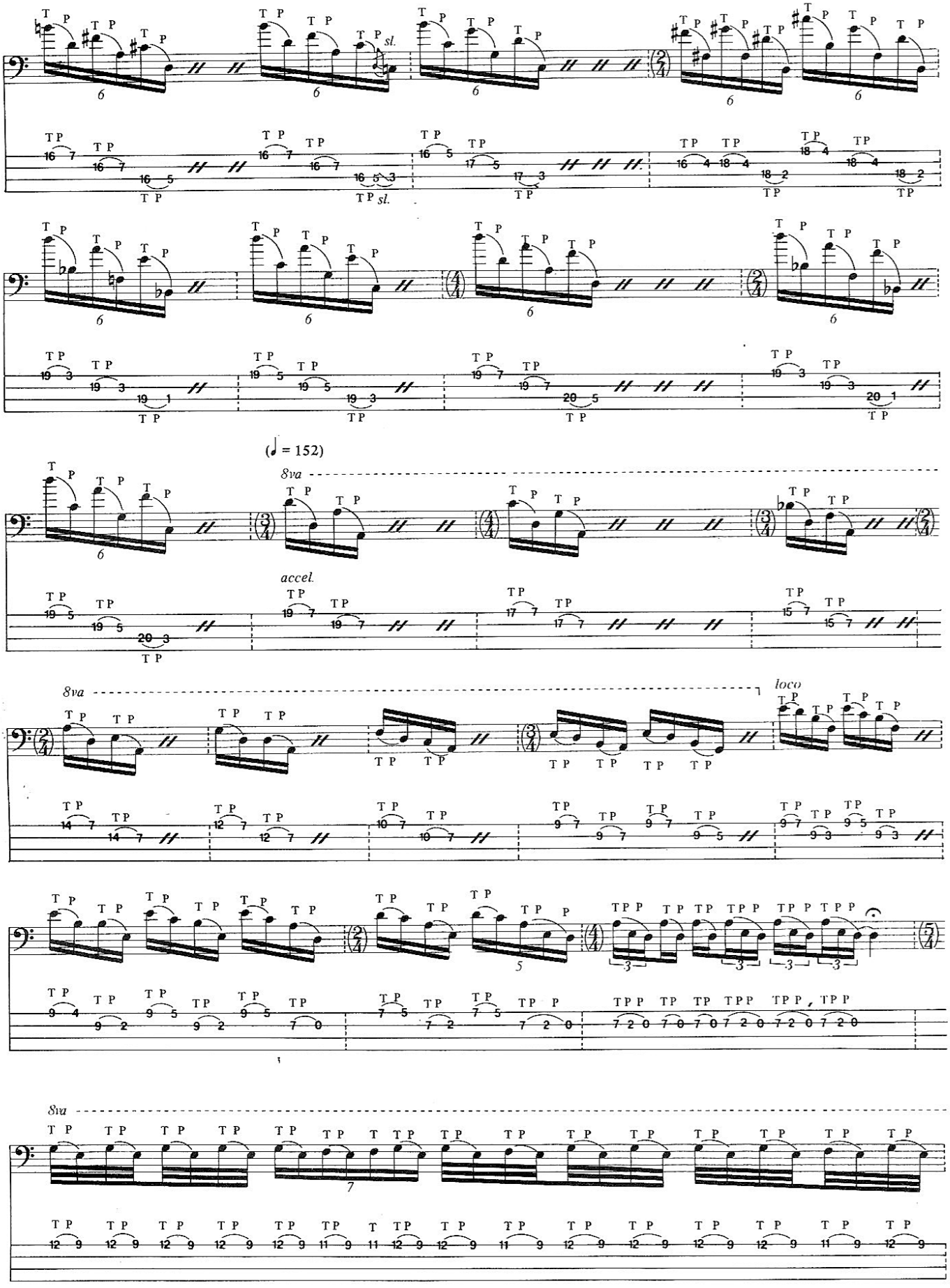


† For next 3 bars, wherever 2 T's in a row appear, tap both w/index fin. of pick hand.



†† Tap both notes w/index fin. of pick hand.



*** Tap A w/index fin., D w/middle fin. of pick hand.

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8va
accel.
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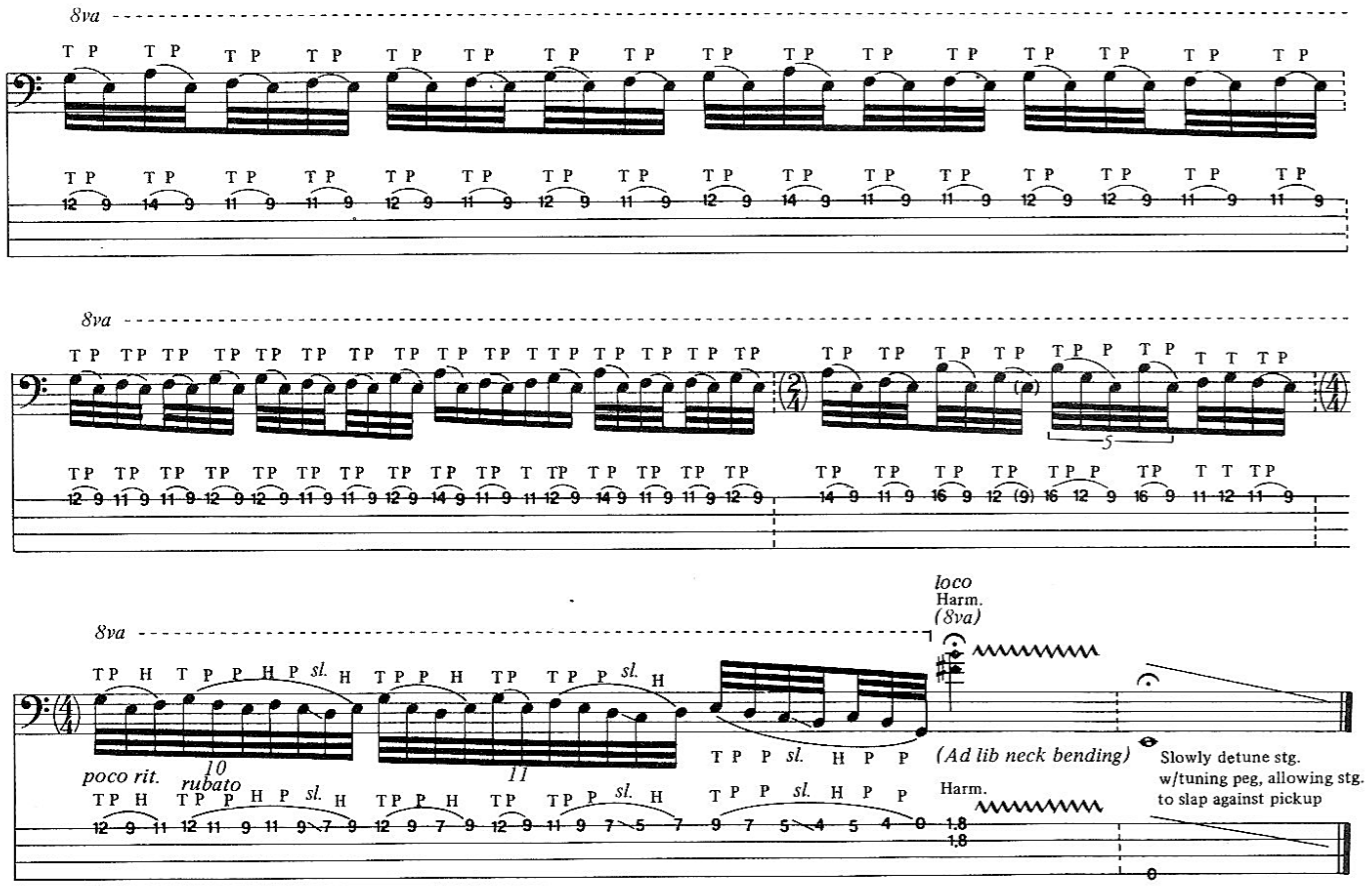
8va
8va
8va
loco
Harm.
(8va)
poco rit.
rubato
(Ad lib neck bending)
Harm.
Slowly detune stg.
w/tuning peg, allowing stg.
to slap against pickup